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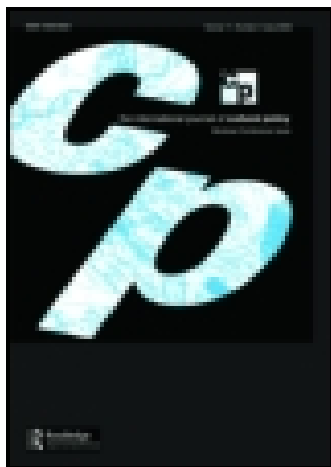
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## Cultural policy through the prism of fiction (Michel Houellebecq)

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Cultural policy studies tends to talk *about* fiction without actually *using* it. A typical move is to place it in an aesthetic realm to be protected, situated and/or critiqued. This is an eminently worthwhile activity. However, this paper explores some ways in which works of fiction may, following their own dynamic, yield significant perspectives upon the world of cultural policy itself. In what ways do fictional works offer us prisms through which to reappraise the worlds of cultural policy? What are the effects of the reconfigurative imaginative play to which they subject the institutions of that world? How are the discourses of cultural policy reframed when redeployed by novelists within free indirect style or internal monologue? The article begins by distinguishing four broad modes in which fictional works refract the world of cultural policy, and then analyses in more fine-grained detail two novels by the leading French writer Michel Houellebecq.

**Keywords:** cultural policy; fiction; Houellebecq

### Introduction: four broad modes of operation

Cultural policy studies tends to talk *about* fiction, like other forms of art, without actually *using* them. Its typical move is to place these in an aesthetic realm or field which it is its job to protect, situate and/or critique. This is an eminently worthwhile activity. However, I want in this paper to explore some ways in which works of fiction may, following their own dynamic, yield significant perspectives upon the world of cultural policy itself. What such perspectives lack in methodological rigour they may make up for in suggestive potency.<sup>1</sup>

In order to do this, I propose to focus on some works of literary fiction that address cultural policy. Clearly, we should not expect literary works to reflect reality in any straightforward manner (though one should not discount the experiential and/or documentary base which may inform such fiction). We can instead treat them as prisms through which traits of a social world are refracted and reconfigured. Certainly, one can emphasize the distortion inherent in this process – *quixotism* and *bovarysme* are terms to describe forms of folly that befall individuals trying to navigate their social world with only the reference points of fanciful fiction to guide them. But we can also see the prism of fiction as producing specific analytic effects. As a prism breaks down sunlight into its constituent wavelengths that we normally cannot perceive, so a work of fiction, in its very play with reality,

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can bring into relief elements of that reality that might normally escape our attention. It defamiliarizes them, to use the term of the Russian formalists (Shklovskij 1965), it makes them strange, and so makes new demands on our cognitive faculties. If one wanted to understand *bovarysme*, for example (an addiction to the schemes of romantic fiction), there are worse starting points than the novel that gave the symptom its name and that staged it so artfully.

Having drawn up a corpus of novels that deal more or less directly with matters of cultural policy, I have provisionally identified four broad and often overlapping modes in which a literary work's prismatic effects of analysis, defamiliarization or revelation might be exercised. These modes can be combined across the work of a novelist, or sometimes within a single novel.

(a) The rarest mode is doubtless that of the 'prophetic' fiction. By this I mean the capacity of a work of fiction not necessarily to foretell the future, but to shape it by revealing or producing a new category of perception.<sup>2</sup> In the context of this paper, such a work might introduce a new reality into the cultural policy firmament. During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, there was a somewhat decrepit, apparently graceless and publicly neglected building in the centre of the Ile de la Cité in Paris. In 1831 that building became the central protagonist of a dazzling new novel (we know it under its translated title, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, but its original French title is, simply, *Notre Dame de Paris*, i.e. the name of the cathedral itself (Hugo 2009)). The novel was a major catalyst in a 'conversion' of public perception, turning the cathedral into not simply a heritage site fit for an extensive 'restoration' project, but a key symbol of France's relation with its past.<sup>3</sup>

(b) A second mode might be represented by novels which aspire to recount involvement in cultural policy projects in a 'realistic' manner and, as it were, for its own sake. One might think of novels such as those by Benigno Cacérès recounting in aspirational mode the encounter between a working-class autodidact and the institutions of cultural policy (e.g. Cacérès 1950). Of course, no literary novel can be simply a transcription of reality (the very attempt to seem so is one literary artifice among others). Cacérès's novel certainly contains its own form of mythical warping in its plotting and style. Other works that might be associated with a realistic mode introduce other kinds of prismatic morphing of the recognizable cultural policy world. An example here might be Malraux's own *Anti-mémoires* (1972, 1976), which take deliberate liberties with the genre of the memoir in order to produce a heightened, sometimes mythified and certainly aggrandized perception of the issues in question. The most interesting aspects of these late writings by Malraux are doubtless not the grand historical fresques, but rather the disjointed, novelistically framed mini-scenes that run through the work – some blatantly fictional, some broadly plausible, some somewhere in between (Malraux 1972, 1976).

(c) A third mode in which fictional works integrate reference to cultural policy might be described as 'symbolic realist'. Works operating in this mode, whether or not they are directly concerned with a cultural policy world as their object, refract that world by drawing on cultural policy institutions as symbolic resources within their overall narrative economy. While such institutions will remain clearly recognizable as such, they are likely in this mode to be subjected to various forms of inflection or distortion for literary effect. As in the case of Malraux's *Anti-mémoires*, this third mode may in specific works overlap considerably with the more directly 'realistic' second mode. One genre which often seems to use this 'symbolic realist' mode is the 'spy' novel, or more generally novels dealing with

the covert intelligence operations of competing States. An author like John Le Carré has mobilized this device. The Russian agent run by the infamous ‘mole’ of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, for example, works as the cultural attaché in the Soviet Embassy in London (Le Carré 1974). The interaction between cultural policy fronts and what they hide is worked out with particular richness in *The Russia House*, after its opening scene at an official British Council fair in Moscow for the ‘spread of British culture’ (Le Carré 1989). One could analyse the unfolding of the novel in terms of the interplay between at least three levels of cultural policy: the world of *explicit cultural policy*, which in immediately post-glasnost Russia is that of improving cultural relations between the UK/USA and Russia through artistic exchange and literary translation; the operations of *covert cultural policy*, where the challenge for the anglo-saxon governments is to create a perception among their own people of a Russia still dangerous enough to warrant ongoing massive military expenditure; and the refraction of both these levels within an individual subjectivity who finally settles on a recalcitrant course of action – a kind of individual policy – that is reducible to neither. A similar broad structure is perceivable in a more recent novel like Robert Harris’s *Ghost*, where the CIA spymaster who is running as his agent the wife of the British prime minister is working out of a cultural exchange front institution in Washington (Harris 2007). The course of action settled upon by the central protagonist – the disenchanted ‘ghostwriter’ of the title – is to write before he is killed the manuscript that is the novel and to secure a channel for its publication. In the worlds of both these novels, truthfulness is not to be found within the discourses of public or covert cultural policy, but rather in the reverberation of these discourses within an individual consciousness – or what Le Carré in a later novel called ‘the solitary decision-maker’ (Le Carré 2013). To put it another way, they dramatize, or imagine, or mythify, or simply render perceptible, the collision between institutional cultural policy imperatives and solitary decision-making.

(d) A fourth mode of prismatic effect operates through forms of allegory. It is based on the construction of universes – and in this context cultural policy universes – that are manifestly not our own. Clearly, the whole art of such an enterprise will be to ensure that selected traits of our universe are recognizable – or better, re-cognizable – through the glass of the fiction. A typical genre in which such an allegorical vision might be worked out is science fiction, or space opera. For our purposes, a prime example here would be Iain M. Banks’ ‘Culture’ novels (e.g. Banks 1987, 1996, 2008). These are set in a universe split between different ‘civilizations’, one of which is called, precisely, ‘The Culture’. It is the model, sometimes comically so, of an enlightened, secular and tolerant value system, and it has developed policies to ensure the persistence of this identity. There are, however, dark corners and aporia within its operations, particularly in its dealings with its religious and/or more belligerent and expansionist, or simply more animalistic rival civilizations. This produces variants of the structures described above, split between explicit and covert cultural policies, and the reverberation of the resulting tensions in the consciousness of particular individuals. Revealingly, these individuals, who often work in the ‘Special Circumstances’ section of the Culture’s organization, and who provide the focus of the novels, tend to be looking for a more restless exploration of life’s potential than can be afforded by the calmly superior certainties informing the Culture’s official doctrines.

There is necessarily something rather abstract in this brief typological overview. I will explore in finer grain over the remainder of this article two novels by a

contemporary French author, Michel Houellebecq, whose work consistently engages with questions of cultural policy, broadly understood. It also straddles, if not the first, then certainly the second, third and fourth of the modes of operation outlined above.

### **Michel Houellebecq: *Platform* and *The Map and the Territory***

Michel Houellebecq is internationally the most prominent of contemporary French novelists. Indeed, if the reader accepts my argument that his novels constitute a prism through which aspects of contemporary cultural policy are reflected, then they may constitute the most widely circulated of all French reflections on cultural policy, broadly understood, over recent years. His public notoriety rests upon the graphic sex scenes that populate some of the novels (though not *The Map and the Territory*) and provocative statements on matters ranging from Islam to Vichy France made either in his own name or that of his protagonists. Underlying these most visible traits, however, though not to be simply dissociated from them, is a sustained imaginative exploration on the relations between work, culture, art and love in the contemporary world. Although he has produced fictions that operate wholly or partially in the fourth ‘science fiction’ mode designated above (*Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*), I will restrict myself here to a study of two works that operate for the most part in the space between the ‘realist’ and the ‘symbolic realist’ modes of prismatic refraction as identified above (*Platform* and *The Map and the Territory*). In doing this, I want to pull out two particular aspects of the two novels’ functioning: the reimagining of institutional complexes, and the infiltration of an ‘undervoice’ into the public discourses of cultural policy.

### ***Imagined institutions***

It is commonplace to oppose the world of institutions to the world of the imagination. Yet a structural feature of Houellebecq’s art is the reimagining of institutional configurations. In the two novels considered here, these institutions are cultural policy institutions, understood in a deliberately broadening sense. The institutional reconfiguration in question does not provide simply a shell for an underlying plot; its development is part of that plot. The shifts in this institutional matrix are an important layer in the novels’ significance, and indeed we can see how the matrix developed in *Platform* is echoed and extrapolated in *The Map and the Territory*.

If for the purposes of this article we take the two novels as a single block, we could say that this block is book-ended by references to public arts institutions (the Ministry of Culture at the beginning of *Platform*, and other institutions – German and American – at the end of *The Map and the Territory*). A lot happens in between, however, and we can only bring out the significance of these references if we explore the wider unfurling of cultural policies both explicit and implicit that propels the narratives.

*The French Ministry of Culture in Houellebecq: significance through insignificance*  
*Platform* almost opens with reference to the national ministry of culture. I say ‘almost’ because it is preceded by a chapter where Michel, the protagonist, arrives at his father’s house in Normandy just after the latter’s death. As he zaps between

channels on his father's 32-inch Sony surround-sound widescreen television, his aesthetic tastes are conveyed: among his favourite shows are *Xena Warrior Princess*, or the popular quiz programme *Questions pour un champion* (Houellebecq 2002, pp. 5–10/11–15).<sup>4</sup> In terms of readerly expectations, we are doubtless supposed to be surprised when Michel tells the police officer at the beginning of the next chapter that he works at the Ministry of Culture (p. 12/18). Far from using this as a symbolic badge of distinction, Michel feels 'overtaken by shame' as he stumbles to explain to the policeman the nature of his work preparing the financing of art exhibitions and spectacles. The policeman puts him out of his misery by suggesting they note simply that he works in the area of 'cultural action', and Michel hastily concurs – 'Yes, that's it ... You could put it like that' (p. 12/18). The policeman, like Michel's hero Julien Lepers, host of *Questions pour un champion*, impresses Michel by his capacity to relate to anything human – even strange creatures like himself working in a domain whose social rationale appears, from the evidence of this exchange, anything but evident. Fortunately, Michel tells us, he is not totally unequipped to navigate this conversation, despite the peculiarities of his professional occupation, as he has watched enough television detective films.

At one level, Houellebecq is clearly here wanting to make mischief with the reader's sense of cultural hierarchy, using the Ministry of Culture as a semantically charged reference through which to create and disrupt expectations among an educated reading public (who might react in an amused, shocked or knowing manner). But the semantic charge of this reference also allows Houellebecq to frame suggestively some of the fundamental issues addressed by the book – notably the decline of French cultural *puissance*, and the significance of work in postindustrial societies. In terms of the typology developed in the first part of this article, the reference to the Ministry of Culture and its history provides a 'realist' canvas (mode b) whose figures are deliberately inflected, reshaped, or simply flattened for symbolic effect (mode c).

Michel tells us that he joined the Ministry of Culture in the mid-1980s, at the time of the 'modernization' of socialism in France, and when 'the illustrious Jack Lang was covering the cultural institutions of the State in splendour and glory' (as often with Michel, one has the sense that he is citing with a kind of placid irony a promotional pamphlet that he has seen lying around) (Houellebecq 2002, p. 25/30). Michel functions, at one level, as a kind of cipher for a routinization and disenchantment that has since overtaken France's most manifest cultural policy agent. He tells us that, since joining the Ministry with the decent salary available during Lang's heyday, he has grown old, witnessing without undue disturbance its 'successive political changes'. We are not told whether he ever invested positive belief in its missions, but if so, then it seems largely to have evaporated. He is fond of his immediate superior, Marie-Jeanne, whose visit at the end of the novel to the psychiatric hospital where he has become a patient is the only human contact that does him any good (p. 346/334). However, he cannot fathom what her work is really supposed to achieve:

Although Marie-Jeanne doesn't, strictly speaking, do anything, her work really is quite complex: she has to stay up-to-date with all the various movements, networks and trends; as she's taken on cultural responsibility, she's always exposed to the risk of being seen as immobile or even obscurantist; it's a danger against which she has to guard herself and the institution. (Houellebecq 2002, p. 15/21)



This is among the first of many subsequent musings on the point or pointlessness of various kinds of cultural, informational and public relations activity in postindustrial Europe. Work at the Ministry of Culture is not the only instance in point, but it is interesting from our perspective here that it is made to function as a kind of limit figure. Michel, in a fictional recasting of the Ministry's organigram, is given an unlikely level of discretion in the projects he selects for artistic support. However, he finds it hard to see more in the artists with whom he deals than self-interested entrepreneurs (p. 183/178). He also struggles to remember anything properly productive he might himself have done with his time at the Ministry (pp. 86, 224–225/88, 217).

I will show later that this provocative undermining of public cultural policy is not the whole story in terms of the institutional layering we can see across *Platform* and *The Map and the Territory*. There are traces even in *Platform* of an enduring role for traditional cultural policy preoccupations. As his package tour party in Thailand visits the ruins of Ayutthaya, it occurs to Michel that 'that's what culture is [...], it's a bit boring but that's good; it returns everyone to their own nothingness' (pp. 80–81/83). He even goes on to wonder, in a flattened echo of Malraux's 'imaginary museum' (Malraux 1967), how on earth the sculptors of the Ayutthaya period managed to give their statues of the Buddha an expression of understanding and majesty. But across the novel as a whole, the cultural ministry of his own nation obtains no such symbolic redress. Indeed, *The Map and the Territory*, the later novel set in France and saturated with cultural policy themes, contains virtually no reference to the Ministry of Culture. It appears only once, when inspector Jasselin is looking for clues to the savage murder of 'Michel Houellebecq', one of the characters in the novel. The tributes from the Minister of Culture, along with others saluting 'an immense creative force, who will forever remain in our memories', are dismissed as 'conformist chicken-feed and mindless platitudes' that would not get them very far in their enquiries (Houellebecq 2012, p. 210/303).

*Corporate transnational takeover: 'the power and reality of the world'*

The protagonists of Houellebecq live in worlds saturated by powerful cultural forces working to shape symbolic environments. The institutions of the State as such appear to represent a relatively minor aspect of this process (indeed the liberties that Houellebecq takes with regard to a purely 'realist' representation tend symbolically to minimize the significance of these institutions). We have already seen how the mental universe of Michel is organized in terms of television programmes and brand-names (usually low-end brand names – he confesses to some puzzlement as regards the attraction of high-end brand names both for the deprived youth who try to steal them and his colleagues at the Ministry who wear them (Houellebecq 2002, pp. 270–271/262–263)). It is, however, when Marie-Jeanne suggests to Michel that he take a break after his father's death that we are introduced to the principal culture-shaping force in the novel: contemporary mass tourism. We are given a sense of this perspective as Michel waits at the ticket-desk of *Nouvelles Frontières*, the package company that is about to take him to Thailand. *Nouvelles Frontières*, he tells us, founded at the end of the 1960s, is representative, along with other emblematic companies such as Club Med or FNAC, of a new face of modern capitalism born at the same time as the 'civilization of leisure'. By 2000, mass tourism had become in terms of business turnover the world's leading

economic activity, and this had been ‘democratized’ through companies like *Nouvelles Frontières* (Michel appears to be reading as he queues an article on the company from the French magazine *Capital*) (pp. 28–30/31–33). Michel is quite clear that he is less interested in discovering for himself a new country, with all the attendant linguistic and organizational complications, than in purchasing a specific tourism package (his final hesitation is between the ‘Rum and Salsa’ and the ‘Thai Tropic’ packages). If there is any snobbery in his approach, it is of the inverted kind, and directed at those on his party who avoid the most obviously touristically commodified aspects of the tour in the name of putatively more authentic folkloric or artistic attractions (pp. 48–49/52). In the novel, the tourist industry appears as the inescapable mediator of intercultural contact in the contemporary world.

Its success is also presented as a symptom of European dysfunction. As soon as they have a few days freedom from their hectic schedules, Michel says, the continent’s inhabitants jump in an aeroplane and fly half way across the world as if they’re escaping from prison (p. 27/31). Mass tourism is presented as an industry that thrives on thwarted satisfaction. Hence Michel’s apparently logical proposal in the second half of the novel, after his return from Thailand and his amorous involvement with an executive assistant from *Nouvelles Frontières* itself. Why not, he asks, combine the tourism industry with that other apparent indicator of mass thwarted satisfaction, the sex industry? Why not propose organized erotic tourism packages? (pp. 240–242/232–234)

Well there are many reasons why not. Critics have quite rightly drawn attention to the sanitized (indeed, one might even say novelistically *censored*) portrayal of overseas prostitution presented in the text (see Morrey 2013, pp. 13–64). These scenes tend to read like male fantasies, and take scant account of the structural exploitation and violence, let alone the sordidness of detail, that governs such activity. Were too many such structural or material details to obtrude, the heady excitement that seizes the novel’s protagonists as they drive their project forward would surely be hard to sustain. The project turns out to be too big and bold for the major French ‘national champions’ alone in this global economic sector, and Michel’s more corporately attuned friends Jean-Yves and Valérie succeed in bringing on board TUI, the biggest tour operator in the world (based in Germany). The pools of European domestic and professional frustration figure as lucrative seams for exploitation, in all senses of the word, by globalized capitalism.

This aspect of the novel has been much debated. I want here simply to bring out its role in the imaginary institutional matrix that is deployed in the work. Like the communist utopia whose rusting wreck Michel contemplates in melancholy manner in Cuba, it is as if the combined worthiness and modishness that characterized the Ministry of Culture were not built upon ‘forces of attraction’ that were ‘elementary’ enough to sustain it as an effective force in the contemporary world (Houellebecq 2002, p. 235/228). ‘The power of Nike, Adidas, Armani, and Vuitton is indisputable’, Michel notes, he can see it in the *Figaro*’s economic pages, even if it leaves him perplexed (p. 272/263). Likewise, as we have seen, the powers of commercial television programming and mass tourism, which leave him altogether less perplexed. The sex industry appears as one further such institutionalized cultural force shaping aspirations, producing and dissolving norms, and channeling behaviour. That this force is cultural rather than a simple mechanical outlet for physical frustration is made clear throughout the novel. One of the challenges for Michel and his two corporately literate associates is to find a name for the new

venture they are proposing. Valérie's boss Jean-Yves ponders her suggestion of 'Eldorador Aphrodite':

'Aphrodite' ... He repeated the word pensively. 'Not bad; it comes over as a bit less vulgar than "Venus". It's erotic, cultivated, a bit exotic: yes, I like it.' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 247/240)

The package that the protagonists are proposing is based both on a form of censorship (of more sordid realities and relations of force inherent in the international sex trade) and a mode of poeticization (that is, the exploitation of the affective connotative forces of language and image, here combining a neo-colonial and neo-classical register). It is, at least initially in the novel, an irresistible proposition for the institutional investors of global tourism's biggest corporation.

The question of the novel's 'complicity' with the censorship and poeticization evoked above is one that has been discussed elsewhere (the matter is not black and white) (see Morrey 2013). For our purposes, we can see the proposition made by the protagonists, within the institutional economy of the novel as a whole, in the perspective of Jonathan Swift's 1729 'modest proposal' (Swift 2009).<sup>5</sup> The author is putting forward a proposal that he knows most readers would find unacceptable 'in real life', and whose fictional depiction blatantly excises or marginalizes a host of more murky undercurrents. The very excess of this conceit however, just like the excessive devalorization of the Ministry of Culture's activities, works to put into relief the force of those institutional strategies, both explicitly and implicitly cultural, that are moulding the contemporary lifeworld.

Houellebecq's explorations in cultural-institutional imagination, operating along the lines of the third mode of the symbolic 'refraction' of our institutional world as identified above, are continued in *The Map and the Territory*. They again provide a layering frame effect, here for the affective and vocational life of the visual artist Jed Martin. There are two notable omissions in comparison with *Platform*. Sex and the human body in general are not objects of exorbitant interest for Jed (though they are not excised entirely from his artistic projects – a painting of a clothed escort girl features as one of his series of 65 tableaux depicting the fundamental modes of work in early twenty-first century Western society). Indeed the author 'Michel Houellebecq', who features as a character in the novel and whom Jed asks to write the catalogue for one of his exhibitions, declares this lack of preoccupation with the human body as something of a relief in the contemporary artistic climate (Houellebecq 2012, p. 96/145). Along with this eclipse of the sex tourism motif, there is also virtually no reference to the national ministry of culture (save as purveyor of platitudes, as noted above, after the murder of the character Michel Houellebecq (p. 210/303)). This is significant given the abundance of cultural policy themes in the book.

One of the reasons why the national ministry of culture does not figure in the book is that its place and functions seem simply to have been absorbed by the behemoths of the luxury, leisure and tourism industries. The first exhibition in which Jed takes part after leaving his fine arts college is organized by the Ricard Foundation (pp. 35–37/60–64). It is here that his work meets its first institutional admirer: Olga, a Russian woman who works for the communications or public relations department of Michelin. Jed had recently undergone, among the cellophane-wrapped sandwiches of a motorway service station, the second major

aesthetic revelation of his life, seized by the sublimity of a Michelin regional map, combining for him the essence of modernity in its combination of a scientific and technical apprehension of the world with the essence of a palpitating animal life underlying it (pp. 29–30/51–52). His picture at the Ricard exhibition was the first of a series of photographs of excerpts from the maps themselves (not the territory they represented), designed to bring into arresting fragmented focus the features of his original intuition. We are not, as readers, invited to treat Jed's artistic intuitions with irony, nor even to doubt the sincerity of Olga's interest, though it is obviously overdetermined (Olga, the narrator tells us later, is one of those foreigners whose education has given them a touching faith in the image of France's culture, and who are always disappointed subsequently that the country's reality does not live up to their expectations (p. 41/69)). The agenda of Olga's hierarchical superiors at Michelin is another matter.

Michelin should not be thought as symbolizing in the novel simply a shift from the public to the private instrumentalization of art. Despite its history, it does not figure as an industrial or post-industrial 'national champion' as promoted since the 1970s by French politicians such as Pompidou, Balladur and Sarkozy (Sarkozy in particular was keen to promote 'national champions' in the transnational media and cultural industries) (Musso 2009). Olga has been seconded from the holding Michelin Financial Company, based in Switzerland, to inflect its strategy in France (when she is later seconded back to Russia, her French superior will complain that the wishes of the French branch of the company now count for nothing (Houellebecq 2012, pp. 67–68/106)). She is supposed to 'recentre the communication' of the tourist businesses it has acquired in France, adapting them to a new clientele, 75% of which comes from China, India and Russia. These tourists are attracted above all by enterprises such as *French Touch*, who specialize in packaging France as the home of cultural refinement, luxury elegance, gastronomic sophistication and rural tranquillity. One of Olga's projects is to set up a Michelin Space for Contemporary Art in Paris, which she thinks will take the brand's image more upmarket in Russia and China, though she encounters resistance from some of the more traditionally minded members of the company management (p. 39/65–66). Jed's Michelin map series offers her the perfect vessel to overcome this internal resistance. Michelin organise Jed's subsequent first solo exhibition, entitled 'The Map Is More Interesting Than The Territory', provide him with internet exhibition space and press relations resources, giving him likewise the opportunity to meditate on the 'capitalist mystery par excellence, the formation of prices' (p. 57/91), as his pictures sell for prices that seem to bear no relation to the contingencies of their production and physical existence.

Like Michel in *Platform*, Olga organizes art exhibitions. Unlike Michel, however, she does this not for a national ministry of culture but for a transnational leisure and tourism corporation that puts her operations at the centre of large flows of financial capital. Moreover, in terms of the institutional play of the novel, Michelin's financial and cultural ambitions do not end here. When Olga returns to Paris ten years later, it is to be programme director for her company's new venture in France, *Michelin TV*. The programme's underlying theme is to be the glorification of France's provinces along the lines pioneered by the iconic presenter Jean-Pierre Pernaut in the latter sequences of TF1's lunchtime news since the 1980s (pp. 152–155/225–228). They have even poached Pernaut from TF1, France's biggest commercial television channel, certainly seen as a national media

champion by Sarkozy (Musso 2009) (or alternatively, by the likes of Pierre Bourdieu, as a toxic national cultural hegemon (Bourdieu 1998)). The novel stages a New Year's Eve reception at Pernaut's Paris residence which is evidently meant to signify a shift in power (*a translatio imperii*) in the audiovisual and cultural landscape of the country. The historic director of TF1, Patrick Le Lay, who had tried to acquire a stake in the new channel is reduced to drunken braggadocio, and is steered away by Pernaut, director of the new channel. Le Lay, head of France's hitherto most powerful televisual enterprise, is simply ignored as irrelevant by the three members of the transnational Michelin board. They are seen by Jed Martin at the end of the party as striding away into the new year, framed within a picture he will never execute, symbolizing the 'power and reality of the world' (Houellebecq 2012, p. 161/238).

### *Enduring public art*

Michel in *Plateforme* leaves his ineffectual position in the Ministry of Culture and approaches in oblique manner the power and reality of a corporate world moulding cultural expectations and patterns for vast profits. Jed Martin in *The Map and the Territory* disintricates himself twice from the unlikely embrace of transnational cultural industry (and, more reluctantly, from the associated embrace of Olga). He does this to find again the solitude wherein he can submit to the unpredictable 'messages' that put him on the track of artistic work that will 'give an account of the world' (Houellebecq 2012, pp. 272, 66, 286/385–386, 104, 406). The semi-*ingénu* Jed Martin, amongst the brash powerplays and expansionism of the artistic, cultural and economic fields portrayed, carries through the novel what is quite a Romantic vision of the artist. Despite contingent overlaps in thematic preoccupation (the Michelin maps, his apparent interest in aspects of artisanal work or rurality), his goals are not, finally, those which a market system can accommodate. After the success of his 'trades and professions' series of paintings, which again sell for prices that strike him as wildly incommensurate, he resolves to produce no more work for the art market. He retires to the country and awaits the intimation of his next project. Revealingly, for our perspective, this intimation comes from a set of public arts institutions, before being preserved for future generations after Jed's death in another public art institution. These institutions, which are not French, receive no particular emphasis as such in the epilogue to the novel, but they appear to have taken us full circle from the opening of *Platform*.

Jed spends the last thirty years of his life preparing what is probably one of the most intriguing video art installations you have never seen. The novel recounts his careful use of time-lapse photography to render the rhythms of plant life, the weathering and corrosion of industrial objects and high-tech components, and the induced fading of the traces of individual human forms represented through photographs and playmobil figures. Using specially commissioned superimposition software, he then merges these discretely produced sequences to evoke something of the human condition, technologically mediated, vegetatively framed and temporally doomed. The narrator tells us, writing some time around the year 2070 and well versed in the extant Chinese studies of Martin's work, that these objects produce a sense of malaise and desolation in their audiences (pp. 286, 291/406, 414). There is, though, something elegiac and peaceful in the way the narrator describes these works, and we are reminded of the Buddhist practice of *Asubha*, the contemplation of material dissolution, as practiced by the novel's inspector Jasselin as a



way of coming to terms with the more disturbing aspects of his professional police work (pp. 193–194/280–281). The narrator also tells us that the inspiration for Martin's work seems to have come from a visit to the *Ruhrgebiet* about 30 years before his death (so in about 2010), where a retrospective exhibition of his work was being organized in a series of decommissioned steel factories that had been converted into art centres. Martin had been struck by the combination of an industrial legacy, some rusted and abandoned and some converted into hives of postindustrial activity, and the surrounding forests whose dense vegetation was already starting to reclaim the deserted spaces of factory production (pp. 290–291/413). The narrator also tells us that Martin's work is now housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art (p. 286/406).

We might summarize the ground covered between the beginning of *Platform* and the end of *The Map and the Territory* in terms of the institutional play evoked above. This institutional play operates across the second and third modes of fictional representation as presented in the first part of this article: the institutions are represented in a sufficiently 'realistic' mode so as to be recognizable as such, but are inflected and reframed for symbolic effect. *Platform* begins with the French Ministry of Culture, at its founding in 1959 the first governmental ministry for culture in the Western democratic world. The significance of the ministry in the novel lies in its fictionally augmented insignificance, bringing out by contrast the cultural scope and power of those cultural industries that have expanded exponentially since the 1970s (television, advertising, tourism, the sex industry). The same themes, plus the art market but minus the sex industry, are taken up again in *The Map and the Territory*, but it is clear that the worth and significance of Jed's art meshes only contingently and transitorily with the preoccupations of these transnational cultural dominions. There are fundamental explorations of the human condition for which the market will provide no space, and it is only thanks to the *Kulturpolitik* of the *Ruhrgebiet* and the hospitality of the Philadelphia MOMA that Jed's vision is expressed and preserved. We are returned, in, for Houellebecq, a disarmingly edificatory full circle, to the value of non-market and hegemonically marginal cultural institutions.<sup>6</sup>

### *Undervoicing*

We should not conclude with this edificatory note, which would rather misrepresent the effect of a Houellebecq novel. An achievement of his novels, as with certain other novels dealing imaginatively with cultural policy themes, seems to me to lie not in edification but in something like its opposite: the opening of a space where, underneath the rhetorical certainties of official discourses, moments of doubt, uncertainty and ambivalence are acknowledged and voiced.

*Platform* and *The Map and the Territory* are novels saturated in the discourse of cultural policy both explicit and implicit. The status of these blocks and fragments of imported discourse is not always clear. Rather as in Flaubert (cf. Culler 1974), there is a pervasive sense of citationality, the impression that the narrative voice or protagonists are quoting ambient phrases – though obviously, the phrases come from institutional repertoires unavailable to Flaubert, combining among others the lexicons of corporate strategy, marketing, tourist guides, pop psychology or policy planning. The status of these apparent citations or borrowings is frequently unstable: are they being used ironically, or because there is unfortunately no better

way to approximate the notion in question, or as a social and cultural marker of position, or simply because they constitute the linguistic and ideational matter traversing the mind of protagonist or narrator? The answer is frequently all of these at once, though in different proportions.<sup>7</sup>

Michel takes up the missionary speak that is the legacy of the French cultural policy tradition to say of himself and Marie-Jeanne: 'it's together that we prepare the plans for exhibitions, that we work in the cause of contemporary culture [que nous oeuvrons pour la culture contemporaine]' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 15/20). The disjuncture between the loftiness of the phrasing and the reality of the work described is patent. Later, Michel concludes that a woman looking for funding and who specialized in making moulds of her own genitalia must have been a good artist because she had led him to *bring a new gaze to bear upon the world* (p. 305/293). As in Flaubert, the device is made deliberately ponderous by italicizing this example of hackneyed phrasing (though the italics are omitted in the English translation). The irony in both cases might be described as weary rather than savage: Michel is fond of Marie-Jeanne though he cannot emulate her zeal, and considers the sculptress as sympathetic for a contemporary artist.

Other institutions project their own versions of zealously corporate or wooden cultural discourse, sometimes bringing their agents to produce incongruous blends of different registers. Olga's immediate boss Forestier, the head of communications in France for Michelin, is well versed in the language of corporate management, and his first reaction to Jed's series of photographed maps is that this is a perfect opportunity for a 'direct commercialization through our networks'. Olga persuades him, however, that this would be counterproductive, and Forestier realises that a different kind of parlance is required. He assures Jed that 'it is out of question for us to appear to alienate your artistic independence', tacitly expecting, the narrator tells us, for Jed to admire his 'elevated perspective' ('la hauteur des vues') (Houellebecq 2012, pp. 54–55/89). He even goes so far at Jed's exhibition as to proclaim to anybody listening 'the end of the misunderstanding between Michelin and the world of art' (p. 49/81). He has certainly understood a new use for art in Michelin's corporate strategy – the irony being, of course, that the underlying misunderstanding remains, at least on his part, as far-reaching as it ever had been.

Yet characters are not simply 'spoken' in the novels. The books also stage, as it were, the encounter between some of the protagonists and the various institutional forms of groupspeak (*langues de bois*) that move around and within them. One patent example of this occurs when Jean-Yves in *Platform* returns home one evening in a bad state, and stumbles upon the charter statement of *Aurore*, the tour operator which has poached him and Valérie from *New Frontiers*. The statement, written ten years previously and displayed in all the group's hotels, is a marketing pitch that is also a kind of private-sector cultural policy pitch, turning *Aurore* into a 'national champion' for the projection of France:

The genius of *Aurore* is to blend together different kinds of expertise, to play on tradition and modernity with rigour, imagination and humanism so as to reach a distinctive form of excellence. The men and women of *Aurore* are the safekeepers of a unique cultural heritage: the art of hospitality. They know the rituals and the customs that transform life into an art of living and the most basic of services into a privileged moment. It is a profession and an art: it is their talent. Creating what is best in order to share it, using conviviality to put people in touch again with what is essential,

inventing new spaces for pleasure: that is what has made of *Aurore* a fragrance of France spread across the world. (Houellebecq 2002, p. 263/254)

Jean-Yves literally cannot stomach the language (even if it's the kind of thing he might have produced himself). He is physically repulsed by it as 'nauseous verbiage' ('un baratin nauséux').<sup>8</sup> Suddenly he realises that its hollow versatility means it could apply to any number of things – notably a well organized chain of brothels. Curiously, his lucid nausea subsides as he plans to integrate the verbiage into precisely that project, and his ambitious attention is absorbed by the prospect of the European tour operators who might be interested.

Jean-Yves's relation to the institutionalized discourses that constitute his professional milieu oscillates between the lucid and the instrumentally absorbed (he doesn't necessarily believe in them, but he is absorbed in them as tools to get him somewhere). The central protagonists in the two novels, by contrast, entertain a more sustainedly interrogatory or puzzled relation to these discourses. When Marie-Jeanne presents Michel to a visitor from the ministerial cabinet as the most important member of the department, perpetually juggling with balances and figures, Michel's first reaction is to try to picture himself literally 'juggling' these things, and he is struck only by the disjunction between this image and the relatively simple operations he carries out on a day-to-day basis (Houellebecq 2002, p. 15/20–21). In a sense, although he seems simply disengaged, Michel takes the discourses around him more seriously than others, trying to give them meaning and stopping when he comes up short. The solitude that accompanies Michel is perhaps a persistent tendency to 'fall out' of the languages that surround him (the only speakers who seem to 'hold' Michel in their language are his lover Valérie and the popular TV quiz-show host Julien Lepers, whom Michel admires because he puts his interlocutors at ease, wherever they're from, and seems to like them (pp. 7, 347/12–13, 334)). He cannot support himself in the self-evidence of his 'work' because, as we have seen, he struggles to assign meaning to what that work produces – he has, in a sense, fallen out of the cultural policy discourse that continues to carry Marie-Jeanne along (pp. 15, 86/21, 88–89). Jed Martin in *The Map and the Territory* seems to have a similarly interrogative relation to the discourses around him (disengaged where we might expect him to be engaged as a 'player' in the art world, but also, rather like Michel, sometimes curious or puzzled where we might expect him to be disengaged). Like Michel, he is persistently exercised by the sense of productive work for its agents (it is the focus of his ten-year mid-life artistic project), but he appears to come to a placid acceptance of what remains obdurately senseless: when asked in a rare interview why his artworks are sold for such astronomical prices, he replies simply that one should not seek meaning in things that have none (Houellebecq 2012, pp. 268, 151–152/381, 224).

*Platform* and *The Map and the Territory* are populated by manifold forms of official institutional culture-shaping discourses. Some of these are attached to organizations traditionally associated with the world of culture (the national ministry of culture to start with, but also other appendages of the art world, particularly in *The Map and the Territory*). The novels stage, however, the rise to imperium of other culture-shaping discourses, associated for the most part with non-State and increasingly transnational agencies (tourism operators, television companies, global brands, etc.). The resulting configurational play with imaginary institutions provides a frame for the two novels, with an important element of continuous development



across the two. The novels also stage, however, the encounter between the meanings promised by such recognizable institutional discourses and the subjective experience of protagonists. This is an encounter which the novel as a genre is particularly apt to explore. It takes up but repositions in our minds those discourses that constitute the ‘power and reality of the world’. Not only does Houellebecq modulate our reading of these through the insidious play of the *style indirect libre*, the transcription that seems only to cite such discourses but actually insinuates ironic fissures into their compact institutionally endorsed solidity. He also underscores them with a kind of undervoice, a voice that expresses all those things for which ambitious expansionist enterprises have little enthusiasm: ambivalence, doubt and self-doubt, exasperation. This may seem something of a nebulous entity for the reader to walk away with. To put into perspective the space it nevertheless opens up, I will conclude with a quotation from another novel, *NW* by Zadie Smith. Natalie Blake, a central protagonist of the novel, has unwittingly crushed her best friend Leah’s spirit through her very professional and familial success, which she has held out for others’ admiration following the established discursive templates for such success and without any hint of the tensions and cracks that have accompanied it (her friend Leah is aware only of her own tensions and cracks). Natalie has an opportunity to repair some of the damage right at the end of the novel:

She wanted to give her friend something of [...] value in return. If candour were a thing in the world that a person could hold and retain, if it were an object, maybe Natalie Blake would have seen that the perfect gift at this moment was an honest account of her own difficulties and ambivalences, clearly stated, without disguise, embellishment or prettification. But Natalie Blake’s instinct for self-defence, for self-preservation, was simply too strong. (Smith 2012, p. 399)

Institutional discourses aspiring to shape cultures (our norms and values) invite us to identify with them, to espouse their solidity and to neglect the apparent comparative insubstantiality of any inner, unauthorized voice. Novels such as those explored here by Houellebecq turn that voice into the primary reality (they literally author-ize it) and suspend the credence we assign to those institutional discourses, tracing their reverberation but also dissolving their solidity. Such fictions prove nothing, of course, but they may sometimes surprise us in the flashes of recognition and reappraisal they produce, and the density of sense they give to the kinds of undervoice that might otherwise seem drowned in insignificance.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. This harnessing of literary fiction for cultural policy reflection is, of course, not without precedent. Raymond Williams mixes unselfconsciously the study of novels and that of political and cultural theory in *Culture and Society* (Williams 1958). I am grateful to Douglas Morrey and Claudia Chibici-Revneanu for reading and commenting on a first draft of this article, and also to two anonymous reviewers for their feedback.
2. I am drawing here on Pierre Bourdieu’s analyses of figures such as Flaubert or Manet as category-redefining ‘prophets’ (see, e.g. Bourdieu 1996).

3. For Hugo's more general 'prophetic' reflection on the necessity for a State-assured cultural policy see also Thiesse (2001, pp. 152–154) and Thiesse (2010, p. 57).
4. References to *Platform* and *The Map and the Territory* in this article contain two sets of page numbers separated by a forward slash: the first refers to the corresponding passages in the English translations of the books, while the second refers to the original French texts (following the editions listed in the 'References' section at the end of the present article). All translations from the French are my own.
5. Swift's proposal was that the poor in Ireland might alleviate their misery by fattening up their children and selling them as food to 'Persons of Quality and Fortune, through the Kingdom' (Swift 2009, p. 272).
6. Some readers might query whether the novel does indeed establish unequivocally the worth and significance of Jed's art. Clearly, we can never see this art, as it can only be conveyed through the novelistic medium of writing. Moreover, there is a certain 'flatness' to Jed's artistic projects which is not altogether unlike the deliberate 'flatness' of Houellebecq's own aesthetic. This produces an inevitable element of undecidability as to his creations' aesthetic interest, and a reader might conclude that Jed the artist is entirely a product of the artistico-commercial institutional complex depicted in the novel. However, there are recurrent indications throughout the novel that his work should be attributed a greater density of significance than this. In a rare direct interjection, the narrative voice tells us that, whatever their other misperceptions, people were 'justified' in seeing Jed as a 'serious artist' (Houellebecq 2012, p. 43/72). Moreover, key protagonists whose perceptions are portrayed as at least relatively independent of institutional servility are each intuitively arrested by something in Jed's art. This applies to Olga and his agent Franz, but also to the fictional character of 'Michel Houellebecq' himself within the novel. Although, at their first meeting, 'Houellebecq' moves rather cursorily through Jed's early work in the photography of industrial objects, he is so seized and absorbed by Jed's work on Michelin maps and professional occupations that he quite forgets for a full hour and a half to light his habitual cigarette (pp. 89–90/136). The otherwise self-parodistically misanthropic 'Houellebecq' also goes on to tell Jed explicitly that he is a 'good artist' (p. 114/173).
7. For suggestive general treatments of literary style and irony in Houellebecq, see Noguez (2003, pp. 74–153); Bellanger (2010, pp. 89–105, 118–122); Morrey (2013, pp. 34–45).
8. One is reminded of Roland Barthes writing on the 'nausea' produced by 'mythological' discourse – a language that seems to do one thing but actually does another (Barthes 1972).

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